



# the dance current

**past to present**  
hip hop dance in Montréal

**Non-western dance**  
in public schools

**Somatic Practices: Part 1**  
The Feldenkrais® Method

**Including Every Body**  
mixed-ability dance in Canada



Volume 7, Issue 3 / September 2004 / \$4  
Display until September 29, 2004



# in this issue features

On the cover:  
Spirit Synott and Anthony  
Guerra / Photograph by  
David Hou

## Social Studies

While there are relatively few people working professionally in **mixed-ability dance** in Canada, several dance organizations, artists and teachers are developing programs and performances that integrate dancers of all abilities. For many audience members, this work challenges accepted notions of what dance is and who can be a dancer.

By ROBIN J. MILLER > 12

## Health Beat

Somatic approaches to movement education can be valuable tools for dance artists in support of health and well being given the demands of a rigorous physical and emotional career. Here, Karen Bowes-Sewell, a ballet teacher and Feldenkrais practitioner, describes the **Feldenkrais Method®** and some of the ways in which she has seen it benefit her students.

By KAREN BOWES-SEWELL, GCFP > 18

## In the Making

B-boying, locking, popping, wacking, punking, jacking, house ... In contemporary practice, **hip hop dance** styles are appearing in a variety of contexts from the traditional urban and club settings to the theatrical stage. Montréal is home to a dynamic scene of hip hop dance artists, crews, collectives and companies who are experimenting with and exploring the potential of their art form.

By LYS STEVENS > 20

Dance forms taught in public schools do not always reflect the **backgrounds and traditions** of many of the students. Why is this so, and how can it change?

By ANN KIPLING BROWN, PhD > 24



# redefining dance to

by Robin J. Miller

**In Oakland**, California, two years ago, a local dance critic refused to review a performance by Axis Dance Company – which includes one dancer with a prosthetic foot and several in wheelchairs – because what they do is “not dance”. A shocking and ignorant statement, because he meant it as an insult, a rejection, before he had even seen what the company could do. And you can be sure he’s not alone in his opinion.

Dance, for many in the Western world, has meant pretty (mostly white) sylph-like women and buffed-up men, moving with well-trained grace and pattern-card symmetry. Modern dance did its best to shake that up in the last century, but in general did not really challenge the dominant aesthetic: even today, rarely do we see a dancer over a certain age on stage, and hardly ever over a certain weight. A dancer who truly challenges the accepted “look” – by being blind or in a wheelchair, with Down syndrome or without an arm or a leg – continues to cause shock waves and knee-jerk denial.

“A lot of people have told me ‘you can’t be a dancer,’” says Toronto-based Spirit Synott. “But I am.”

Synott is a professional dancer and choreographer, trained in ballet, Horton, Graham, folk, African and Caribbean dance techniques. She has presented solos and duets,

with non-disabled partners, at such venues as Toronto’s Betty Oliphant and Buddies in Bad Times Theatres, Harbourfront Centre and Roy Thompson Hall, and has performed in Calgary, Winnipeg, Ottawa and Vancouver. She has also appeared as a guest artist with Toronto’s Canboulay Dance Theatre and OMO Dance Company, and this past summer performed as part of Toronto’s Dusk Dances Festival – dancing both in and out of her wheelchair. “I dance more out of the chair than in it, because the chair doesn’t define me,” Synott says. “It’s just a mode of transportation that gets me from point A to point B, and the more I’m in a position of having to sit still, the more I crave movement. Most people find it pretty shocking, though, to see me out of the chair, on the floor or being twirled around by my ankles by a big, able-bodied male dancer. But I am strong (I can bench press 150), I am trained, and I am choosing to do this.”

Getting over the shock isn’t easy for some audience members however, especially since integrated or mixed ability dance is relatively unknown in Canada. Outside of Synott in Toronto and Corpuscule Danse in Montréal – a contemporary dance company founded by wheelchair dancer France Geoffroy with Martine Lusignan and Isaac Savoie in 2000 – it is hard to find professional dancers with



include

every  
body



Spirit Synott and Anthony Guerra / Photograph by David Hou



Spirit Synott / Photograph by David Hou

disabilities (or even non-professional, for that matter) actively performing. It's a somewhat different story in both the United States and the United Kingdom. The United States boasts at least a dozen mixed ability dance companies, including Axis Dance Company in California, which has attracted such renowned choreographers as Bill T. Jones and Joe Goode to create new work for them, as well as Full Radius Dance in Georgia and the large and well-established Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels. New York modern dancer Homer Avila, who lost his right leg and hip to cancer in 2001, continued to perform to tremendous acclaim before his death from the disease last winter, inventing new ways to dance – and jump and cartwheel and balance – without using a crutch.

In England, Anjali Dance Company is a professional contemporary dance company, whose dancers all have learning disabilities. CandoCo Dance, founded in 1991, began as a company that blended dancers in wheelchairs

with non-disabled dancers, but in its most recent work, *The Human Suite*, choreographed by New York-based Stephen Petronio, the company included a deaf dancer as well. Both Anjali and CandoCo are part of a growing number of dance companies and schools in the United Kingdom, supported by significant funding from government bodies, that offer dance education and training for dancers of all abilities. Last February, Doug Durand of the Victoria Dance Series brought choreographer/teacher Jo Parkes from England – with fellow workshop leader Kelly Davidson – to give two People Moving workshops in Vancouver and Victoria. The workshops focussed on helping experienced dance artists and teachers discover how they can include students with differing abilities in both class and performance.

"I was literally thrown into the deep end," says Parkes, after being appointed to the faculty of Newham Sixth Form College (essentially a senior high school/community college) in

## Canada has definitely lagged behind in exploring and expanding the potential for people with disabilities – although that is slowly beginning to *change*

East London, where all programs are inclusive for students with physical and learning disabilities. “Like everybody else, I learned to dance standing in rows facing the front and it was my job to look like the teacher. But most of these students can never and will never look like me. I had to question all of my assumptions about teaching dance and learn to start with the individual. I learned to help the students adapt movement material or create their own movement and find their own pace of learning. It was massively challenging, and I went home in tears many an evening during my first year.” She persevered, however, and now, in addition to her teaching in Newham, Parkes works around the world choreographing integrated dance, most recently with young dancers in Ethiopia.

Linda Evans was one of forty-four people to participate in Parkes’ People Moving workshops on the West Coast last winter. Blind since birth, she was deeply excited about Parkes’ workshops, her first dance experience since the 1970s, when she helped design a movement and body awareness program for the blind and visually impaired. “I thought then that movement was fantastic,” she says. “It changed my centre, my way of standing, and improved my balance and coordination.” But more than just therapy for the body, movement was also therapy for the mind and heart. “It gave me a chance to express myself, my being, in a whole other way.”

The challenge for Evans since the 1970s has been to find other, long-term opportunities to explore movement in her hometown. Without the established and substantial civic

support available in England, and the private philanthropic funding that is a tradition in the United States, Canada has definitely lagged behind in exploring and expanding the potential for people with disabilities – although that is slowly beginning to change. The People Moving workshops were fully subscribed, while organizations such as The Dance Centre in Vancouver and The School of Dance in Ottawa are actively encouraging the notion that everybody can dance.

When dancer/choreographer Helen Walkley was appointed artist-in-residence at The Dance Centre in 2002/03, one of the conditions was that she do outreach work in the community. She chose to develop projects with a nearby women’s prison, an inner-city high school, the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre – located in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the country, and with the GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre. In 2003 and 2004, a number of individuals from the GF Strong project continued to work with her through a further series of half-day workshops, developed by the Society for Disability Arts and Culture, that included participants with various physical, sensory and mental disabilities (one was losing his short-term memory, but had developed “a truly astonishing note-taking system”). The result, Walkley says, “was really beautiful work. There was a wonderful and joyous atmosphere, and that allowed me and the other able-bodied movers to penetrate our own lack of knowledge and become familiar with these people and the way they move. Their generosity and openness was stunning.”

West African and improvisational

dance teacher Shara Weaver, who developed the weekly adult DanceAbility Program at The School of Dance in Ottawa with comedian Alan Shain in 2001, was also struck by the openness of the people in her classes (which are now over-subscribed; a second adult class was recently added and the school is developing a pilot program for children). But she was even more impressed by her students’ desire to perform. “We decided at the beginning that we didn’t want to push anyone into performance, but it turns out that they are real risk takers,” says Weaver. “They take a lot of artistic risks in performance, and they excel in improvisation. The dancers in our program love to move, and they use natural movements that are their own, that are unique to them. To me and to our audiences, I think, these movements are equally as exciting as a learned modern technique, or jazz or ballet.”

Both Walkley and Weaver hope to move on to the next level – to a public performance of integrated dance for Walkley and to a permanent, professional integrated company for Weaver – but it will likely be an uphill battle. The Society for Disability Arts and Culture intended for Walkley’s workshops to build to a performance during the Society’s kickstART2 Festival, September 16TH through 19TH, 2004, at the Roundhouse Community Centre in Vancouver, but the financial support was just not there. Much to Walkley’s disappointment, she was cut back to presenting a full-day workshop only. Weaver has hopes that her performance this past June with four other dancers (including two dancers with disabilities) at the



The Society for Disability Arts and Culture's kickstart 2 Festival runs from September 16th through 19th at the Roundhouse Community Centre in Vancouver.

**Learn more >>**

### Books

*Making an Entrance: Theory and Practice for Disabled and Non-Disabled Dancers*, by Adam Benjamin. Routledge, London and New York, 2002.

*Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, by Ann Cooper Albright. Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, N.H., 1997.

### Websites

[www.artslinx.org/heal/dance.htm](http://www.artslinx.org/heal/dance.htm)

This site provides a directory of dance companies that include people with physical, sensory or learning disabilities.

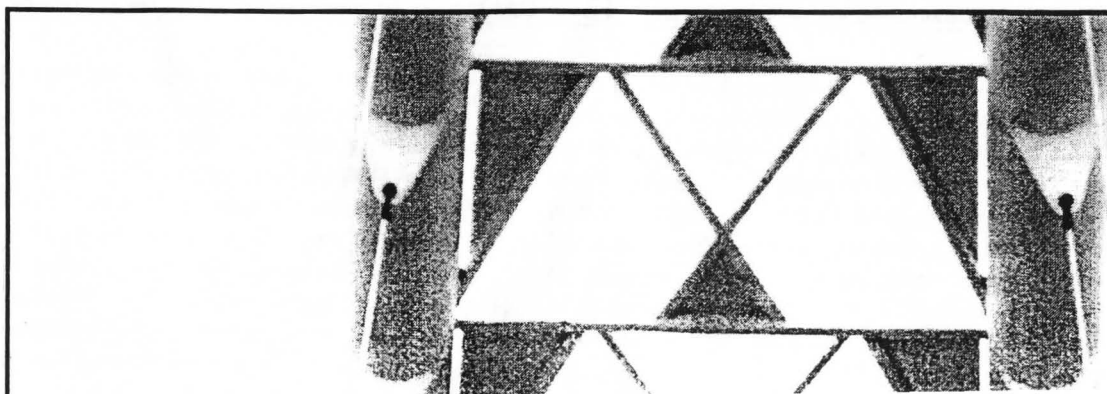
[www.communitydance.org.uk](http://www.communitydance.org.uk)

This U.K. site — operated by the Foundation for Community Dance — offers a strong archive of papers and articles (many from the Foundation's own quarterly *Animated* magazine) on a range of dance topics, along with useful links to other resources and research. Four articles from *Animated* to look for:

- Bird, J. "Embracing Difference," Autumn 2000, 12.
- Carruthers, J. et al. "Disability and Dance Debated," Winter 2002, 12.
- Masefield, P. and Ken Bartlett. "Dancing Differently," Spring 2002, 4.
- Owen, N. and Mandy Revers Rowe. "To Integrate or Disintegrate," Spring 2003, 9.



Paulo Raposo and Spirit Synott / Photo by Jim Atkinson



inaugural Square Zero Independent Dance Festival in Ottawa will eventually lead to the creation of a professional integrated company in her city. Spirit Synott, however, can attest to how difficult it can be to get professional mixed-ability dance onto Canadian stages as more than a novelty.

Synott is booked to perform this month at the Vancouver kickstART2 Festival (where Walkley was also originally programmed), but she wasn't sure whether the money would be in place to get her there until close to the last moment. "Making a living as a dancer is hard enough, let alone making a living as a dancer in a wheelchair," says Synott. "It's hard enough to take class and to train the way you have to. Many times I've crawled up the stairs to get to a studio on the second or third or fourth floor, pushing my wheelchair in front of me. It's hard to find stages that are accessible, too. And of course once you're on stage you're up against deeply ingrained ideas about what movement is and how it should look – who can be a dancer and who can't – when the focus really should be on whether the work is good or not."

At the heart of contemporary dance is the never-ending hunt for a new and different movement language, a new vision for what the body can do and say. Perhaps dancers like Synott, who do not and cannot move in purely classical ways, hold the key to that search – making that Oakland critic's noxious statement almost right. Perhaps mixed ability dance is *not* dance in the traditional or conventional sense, but something that we do not have a word for yet. Jo Parkes, for

one, cannot contemplate going back to working with solely non-disabled dancers. "The inclusive work I've done has challenged me to my very core. There is so much unlimited potential there. For me, it's all about redefining notions of excellence, redefining the meaning of dance, which can only make the current dance world richer." ■

### Sommaire

Bien qu'il y ait peu de personnes œuvrant dans le milieu de la danse intégrée au Canada, plusieurs organismes de danse, artistes et enseignants mettent sur pied des programmes et des spectacles avec des danseurs de toutes les capacités. En février 2004, la Victoria Dance Series et The Dance Centre à Vancouver proposaient une série d'ateliers, animés par Jo Parkes et Kelly Davidson d'Angleterre. Artistes en danses et enseignants d'expérience apprenaient comment inclure les élèves de différentes capacités dans leurs cours et leurs spectacles. L'enseignante de danse Shara Weaver a cofonder un programme de danse intégrée à la School of Dance à Ottawa. À Vancouver, l'interprète et chorégraphe Helen Walkley travaille avec la Society for Disability Arts and Culture pour offrir une série d'ateliers qui incluent des participants avec différentes capacités. L'interprète et chorégraphe torontoise Spirit Synott s'est produite dans divers spectacles en solo et en duo, dansant en fauteuil roulant et sans fauteuil roulant. À Montréal, France Geoffroy est directrice artistique de Corpuscule Danse, une compagnie de danse intégrée. Pour de nombreux publics, la danse intégrée met au défi les notions acceptées de la danse et de l'interprète. ■

## Dancefact

by Amy Bowring for Dance Collection Danse [www.dcd.ca](http://www.dcd.ca)

**W**hat might be seen as an early form of what we now call "dance animation" occurred in Winnipeg in the late 1930s and 1940s. After initiating the Winnipeg Ballet Club in 1938, Gweneth Lloyd and Betty Farrally knew that they needed to educate Winnipeggers in order to attract an audience to the club's performances. On the second Sunday of each month, Lloyd and Farrally held lecture-demonstrations in their Portage Avenue studio. The presentations taught audiences about the work involved in becoming a ballet dancer and the process of making a

and boys in white shirts, black tights and white socks demonstrated a series of simple exercises and dance phrases while Lloyd enlightened audiences with her narration. This kind of outreach activity was successful in building audiences and in gaining the interest of patrons such as Lady Tupper, whose volunteerism was significant and ultimately resulted in the company's name change to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. (Source: Wyman, Max. *The Royal Winnipeg Ballet: The First Forty Years*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1978.) ■